DAWN

OPINION

Perils of overuse

THE theme for this year's World Antimicrobial Awareness Week, which ends today, is "Act now: protect our present, secure our future". The WHO estimates that roughly one in six laboratory-confirmed bacterial infections is resistant to available antibiotics, with some of the highest resistance rates reported from South Asia. Globally, drug-resistant infections are linked to more than a million deaths annually, while the development of new antibiotics is unable to keep pace with rising resistance.

The situation hits home. Between 2000 and 2015, antibiotic consumption in Pakistan rose by around 65pc, making the country one of the world's highest consumers. Hospital audits suggest that over half of antibiotic prescriptions are irrational or inappropriate, and in some specialties misuse has approached 70pc. Outside hospitals, things are worse: studies indicate that many pharmacies and medical stores continue to sell antibiotics without a doctor's prescription, despite laws prohibiting such sales. Research has found high levels of self-medication even among healthcare students, while surveys of parents show persistent misconceptions — for instance, believing antibiotics prevent common colds or stopping treatment as soon as symptoms ease. Such misuse is eroding the effectiveness of life-saving drugs. Resistant bacteria are now detected not only in ICUs but in rivers and food chains, underscoring how human, animal and environmental health are intertwined. For poorer households, prolonged illness, repeat courses of costly second-line drugs and lost income can be financially devastating. At the same time, newer targeted antibiotics remain out of reach for many patients in low- and middle-income countries; one analysis found that in severe drug-resistant infections, fewer than 7pc of patients received the medicines they needed. Overuse and lack of access thus feed the same crisis.

On paper, Pakistan has acted: a National Action Plan on antimicrobial resistance was adopted in 2017, covering the period up to 2022, and work is underway on a second phase framed around the 'One Health' approach. Yet independent reviews highlight underfunding, weak surveillance, limited laboratory capacity and slow progress in turning policy into practice. Awareness studies from some regions still show worrying gaps in public knowledge and behaviour. The state must realise that antimicrobial resistance is a central development threat. Countering it requires enforcing prescription-only sales of antibiotics and cracking down on non-prescription dispensing and aggressive pharmaceutical marketing. All hospitals, public and private, need funded teams to oversee antibiotic use and infection control. Primary care needs rapid, affordable diagnostics so doctors are not compelled to prescribe 'just in case', while regulators must curb routine antibiotic use in poultry and livestock. Finally, sustained public education campaigns are essential to drive home a simple message: every unnecessary antibiotic taken today steals treatment options from tomorrow's patients.

Harsher monsoon

ALARM bells are ringing, and it is really hoped the government is listening. The NDMA has issued an earlier-than-usual monsoon warning, saying that Pakistan could face 22-26pc above-normal rainfall next year. The advisory reminds us how the country faces escalating climate extremes, where each year brings a new 'record' of loss and disruption. After the devastation of 2022, caused by glacial melt and record monsoon rains, and the deadly 2024 floods, driven by stalled monsoon systems that unleashed days of downpour, the prospect of an even harsher season should trigger an immediate shift from reaction to readiness. The NDMA's disclosure that 3.1m people had to be relocated to safety this year alone speaks to both the scale of the threat and the fragility of Pakistan's disaster-management architecture. Early warnings issued six to eight months in advance will hold little meaning if riverine encroachments still stand, drains stay clogged, and provincial administrations lack the capacity or will to enforce evacuation plans. Tourism restrictions in June and July signal prudence but they are by no means a substitute for resilient infrastructure, local-level preparedness, and coordination across the federation.

The prime minister's directive to begin early preparations and immediately implement the Ministry of Climate Change's short-term plan is welcome, but political urgency must be matched by administrative discipline. Pakistan has long suffered from a pattern in which plans are drafted, alerts are issued, meetings are convened and yet the same communities drown each year because enforcement collapses at the provincial and district levels. That pattern must break. The proposed meeting of the National Water Council must be more than symbolic. It needs to address the questions of land use, river management, water governance, and resource allocation that successive governments have avoided. With climate-driven hazards intensifying, the margin for complacency has evaporated. We must act now to strengthen embankments before the rivers swell, pre-position relief supplies before roads wash out, and empower local disaster committees before the first cloudburst. Urban centres too must prepare. Cities like Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar can no longer afford dysfunctional drainage, unchecked construction, and seasonal firefighting. The early warnings for 2026 offer the country an unusual gift: time. Squandering this opportunity would be unforgivable.

Pending justice

THE paradox for Pakistan's prosecutors is that they have the power to obstruct, but not enough to resolve. Former Supreme Court justice Athar Minallah has regretted the dearth of competence and integrity in criminal probes and prosecutions. In the detailed verdict on a double murder case, issued prior to his resignation, the judge not only questioned the legitimacy of judicial confessions to convict the accused but also held that appellants are "entitled to the benefit of doubt". This again confirms that the dismal state of legal proceedings in Pakistan is the primary reason for congested registers. Currently, over 2.2m cases are pending in courts across the country. This figure represents more than just volume. It is a reflection of disputes held hostage to uncertainty due to inefficiencies at the lower levels of the justice system and missing structural reforms.

We cannot continue with this dysfunction. The prosecution's failure sets the guilty free, to the detriment of society. Resolute action to establish a judicial system that serves citizens without discrimination is vital. Global experts say that among the most significant performance markers of a criminal justice system is the conviction rate. This ruling is not the first to point out how the prosecution's inability to establish guilt impedes prevention and control of crime. Complacency is not an option as wrongful acquittals foster impunity, erode public trust and stifle economic progress as investments stay away from unsafe societies. Besides, corruption in police, the judiciary and bureaucracy ensures freedom for the perpetrators. Only autonomy, databanks, training, upgraded forensics departments and improved incentives for state prosecutors will improve conviction rates and fix the crisis. Penalties should also be imposed on parties causing needless delays to limit pendency. Pushback must rise from every section for a progressive approach to law, such as restorative justice. At the moment, public safety hangs in the balance.

BY MALEEHA LODHI

Obstacles to Gaza plan

It would be a mistake for Pakistan to send troops for the stabilisation force in Gaza.

BY approving a US-sponsored resolution, the UN Security Council handed an international mandate to President Donald Trump's 20-point 'peace plan' for Gaza. But it did this without any input from Palestinians. Hamas rejected the resolution saying it fails to meet Palestinian rights and demands and "imposes a mechanism to achieve the [Israeli] occupation's objectives". The resolution can only be implemented if Hamas signs up to it. This means complex negotiations lie ahead if the plan is to progress beyond the present ceasefire, which is being violated daily by Israeli forces, who have also been crossing the 'yellow line'. This has taken the Palestinian death toll to almost 70,000 in the two-year genocidal war imposed by Israel.

The UNSC resolution is short on specifics and ambiguous in key areas. It ignores all previous resolutions on Palestine. It authorises the creation of a vaguely defined transitional governance body, the Board of Peace, chaired by Trump and members decided by him, to oversee a Palestinian "technocratic" committee responsible for day-to-day running of Gaza. It also authorises the BoP to establish a temporary multinational international stabilisation force (ISF) "to deploy under unified command acceptable to the BoP". This will not be a UN peacekeeping mission nor be overseen by the UN. Its mandate is unclear and details are lacking on its scope and structure. It is however tasked to "demilitarise the Gaza Strip" and carry out "permanent decommissioning of weapons from non-state armed groups", including Hamas.

The original US draft made no reference to Palestinian statehood. But at the insistence of Muslim countries, the final resolution mentions a "credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood". But this is wrapped in so many conditions that it denudes it of real meaning. Weak Arab negotiators failed to get a firm commitment to a Palestinian state in the resolution. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remains firmly opposed to any Palestinian state.

The UNSC resolution was welcomed across the world as a step towards peace despite concerns of many countries and Council members, including Pakistan, about its lack of clarity in core areas. China and Russia, who abstained on the vote, both voiced concern about the vague nature of key elements, lack of Palestinian participation and absence of commitment to a two-state solution.

China's ambassador to the UN, Fu Cong, said the resolution "does not [reflect] the fundamental principle of Palestinians governing Palestine". Russia's UN envoy, Vassily Nebenzia, described the stabilisation force as "reminiscent of colonial practices". In a scathing critique, the UN special Rapporteur for Palestine said, "Rather than charting a pathway towards ending the occupation and ensuring Palestinian protection, the resolution risks entrenching external control over Gaza's governance, borders, security, and reconstruction. The resolution betrays the people it claims to protect."

In Gaza itself, the UNSC resolution's main provisions were viewed with great scepticism, according to Al Jazeera reporters on the ground. One resident told the news outlet "Our people … are able to rule ourselves. We don't need forces from Arab or foreign countries to rule us". The transitional governing arrangement is seen as outsiders deciding the fate of Palestinians. Theinternational stabilisation force is viewed with deep suspicion — "not as a guarantee of protection but rather a foreign security arrangement imposed without their consent".

Of course, it is the stance of Hamas and other Palestinian factions that is consequential for the resolution's enforcement. Hamas still controls Gaza up to the 'yellow line' held by Israel. Its popularity has risen since the ceasefire, according to the latest poll by the West Bank-based Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research. Hamas has rejected the UN resolution on a number of grounds. It said the resolution "imposes an international guardianship mechanism on the Gaza Strip". Assigning the international force to disarm groups resisting the occupation "strips it of its neutrality, and turns it into a party to the conflict in favour of the occupation".

Hamas has argued that any international force, if established, "must be deployed only at the borders to separate forces, monitor the ceasefire, and be fully under UN supervision". "It must also operate exclusively in coordination with official Palestinian institutions." "Resisting the occupation by all means is a legitimate right guaranteed by international laws and conventions." Hamas also said disarmament is an "internal matter" linked to the end of occupation and creation of a Palestinian state.

It is possible Hamas may be prepared to disarm in exchange for total Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, which would end its occupation. But that can only be tested in serious negotiations that have to take place if the UN-endorsed Trump plan is not to collapse.

The expectation from the stabilisation force to demilitarise Gaza and disarm resistance groups is likely to deter several Muslim countries from joining it. Some of them are engaged in talks to contribute to the force. Israel has to approve countries that can be part of the force. So far it has rejected Turkiye's participation. The international force will be answerable to the BoP and is intended to work with Egypt and Israel to demilitarise the Gaza Strip. That means it can get caught in a shooting war and act like an enforcement force rather than a peacekeeping one. Its task will also be to secure the borders and train the Palestinian police.

There are at least three reasons why Pakistan should not join ISF. One, it should not be part of a force whose key task is to police Hamas, not protect Palestinians. The implications for Pakistan, for example, of any clash between its troops and Palestinians would be serious. Two, deployment would involve close cooperation with Israel and arguably lure Pakistan into a trap to recognise Israel and join the Abraham Accords. Moreover, Israel's continuing ceasefire violations and occupation of over half of Gaza pose major obstacles to Trump's plan. In these circumstances, Hamas will not disarm. Walking into such a quagmire would therefore be a mistake for Pakistan.

The challenges facing implementation of the Gaza peace plan are formidable. At this inflection point for the plan, it is uncertain whether it will be able to deliver peace or meet the same fate as so many failed plans for Palestine have in the past. ■

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.

BY UMAIR JAVED

Going back in time

WITH a series of significant constitutional amendments as well as de facto changes in governance, a distinctive political system is taking shape in Pakistan. The fact that it is authoritarian goes without saying. The exact form of this authoritarianism is worth thinking through.

The bare standard definition of democracy, ie, a political system where election results generally decide who sits in office, was effectively done away with after the 2024 poll. The existence of significant question marks over the electoral validity of the civilian government marked a clear shift in the 'hybrid regime' dynamic in place since 2018.

With time in office dependent on decree rather than election outcomes, parliament itself now operates within the limitations set by an establishment-controlled executive. The legislative agenda, in whatever form it exists, is now centrally ordained rather than deliberated and discussed. The PTI, despite its ballot box performance, stands disenfranchised and marginalised in this process.

The concluding phase of the system's transformation comes via the passage of the 26th and 27th amendments. Through these changes, the judiciary in nominal terms is now subject to parliamentary authority. But as laid out above, if parliament is de facto subservient to the executive, that means the judiciary now too is an implementation branch of executive power.

Countries the world over conjure up a variety of different political systems enshrined in their constitutions — presidential, semi-presidential, parliamentary, consociational etc — but all of them have one thing in common: judicial review of the executive. With the latest developments in judiciary-executive relations, thanks to amendment nos. 26 and 27, the last remaining vestiges (mostly a fig-leaf) of constitutionalism stand discarded.

So what are we left with? It's tempting to think of this as personalised autocracy, or even some 21st-century variant of absolutism. A strongman at the top ruling through a set of vassals, drawing on the power of an inordinately well-funded and organised security apparatus. The historical parallels evoke Bismarck, but the closest contemporary parallels are Middle Eastern dictatorships, especially in Egypt.

But there is a historical instance that resembles the current situation in somewhat similar ways. This instance is in fact from this very region, which makes the comparison more apt. And it won't be remiss to suggest that the patterns of authority taking root in Pakistan today actually go all the way back to the roots established during an earlier era.

I'm primarily referring to the political system that evolved in the late colonial period, especially through its two main legislative instruments — the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935. Conventionally taught in the local curricula as 'dyarchy', the system first devolved several aspects of governance to provincial governments, though with varying scope for elected versus non-elected representatives. At the central level, some aspects were handed over to the legislative council, while others (finance, defence, administration) remained under executive authority.

> The current configuration of governance is not too dissimilar to what the British envisioned in the early 20th century.

The Government of India Act, 1935, enlarged the role of elected provincial legislatures in governance, but maintained executive control on central subjects. The graduation of the legislative assembly to a truly representative governing authority never took place. Self-government was thus only made possible with the end of colonial authority.

Allowing for some liberty in the analogy, Pakistan's current configuration of governance is not too dissimilar to what the British envisioned in the early 20th century. The provinces have become concessionary arenas for popular politics. Party activity operates somewhat unencumbered, to the extent that even the main opposition to the regime is allowed to retain its government in KP.

NFC transfers help lubricate this politics, with party support being shored up (as in PPP in Sindh and PTI in KP) or being rebuilt from its obliteration (PML-N in Punjab) through patronage and mega projects. Much like in colonial India, elites from the propertied classes use this arena for a variety of political and self-serving objectives. Effectiveness of spending and impact on welfare are secondary concerns.

At the centre, though, the story is entirely different. Here we see the exercise of viceregal authority in full bloom. Parliament serves the same function (with the same degree of potency) that the legislative council historically did. The judiciary's primary task is to provide exceptions to bypass any fundamental rights. Key decisions on finance, defence, and administration are taken by civilian and military bureaucrats, and the current cabinet resembles the appointed officials of a past era in all but name.

Such authoritarian control coexisting with political federalism, at least for now, seems like an odd combination. Past episodes of dictatorial control tried to centralise authority by undercutting the provinces through steps like the One-Unit scheme or via the curtailment of provincial resources). But in many ways, events of the past few years are a reversion of the Pakistani state to its foundational DNA from the early 20th century.

The tragedy here is the direction of change. Each successive Government of India Act enlarged the space for representative politics, under strong pressure from mass movements of self-rule and independence. The political sphere of that time carried a variety of ideological currents, all of which sought an emancipated future — one in which viceregal authority would give way to the exercise of sovereignty by the people themselves.

Our direction is the opposite. Having enshrined the principles of democratic government and federalism in 1973 (reaffirmed in 2008), the state has now moved in the opposite direction. It has closed off key domains of governance from representative authority, shut off judicial review for its actions, and made parliament largely redundant in form, if not in appearance. Barring any resistance, the next step on this trajectory would take us further back into the late-19th century, when even provincial politics is deemed surplus to requirement. Let's see what the 28th amendment has in store. ■

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